



More Massachusetts public employees getting paid parental leave

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How much paid parental leave do public employees get?

BOSTON - When Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu was pregnant and traveling around the city, constituents would tell her about the difficulty they faced taking time off work, then returning after they had a baby.

"It is an issue that directly feeds income inequality when women can't get back into the workforce after they've had a baby or new parents after adoption have to choose between being there to take care of that new child or going back to work sooner than they would like, or taking unpaid leave," Wu said.

At City Hall, Wu said new parents would use sick days and vacation time if they wanted to get paid while taking time off.

Wu introduced a city ordinance in March, which was passed by the City Council and signed by Boston Mayor Martin Walsh in May, creating Boston's first paid parental leave policy for city employees.

Boston is not alone. Since May, Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey and Treasurer Deborah Goldberg, both Democrats, have introduced new paid parental leave policies for their employees.

Asked whether state government overall should offer more generous paid parental leave, Gov. Charlie Baker, a Republican, said, "I certainly think its something that's worth looking at." But, Baker added, "I want to make sure since we're talking about taxpayer money here that any proposal that we make on this is one that's affordable."

The growing attention to paid parental leave in the public sector comes as President Barack Obama, a Democrat, gave six weeks of paid parental leave to federal employees and called on cities and states to do the same. The U.S. Department of Labor set aside money to help state and local governments implement paid leave policies.

The national Family and Medical Leave Act requires public and private employers with more than 50 workers to provide up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave due to the birth or adoption of a child or for an illness. But the United States is one of only a handful of countries worldwide not to mandate paid maternity leave. According to **a 2014 report** by the White House's Council of Economic Advisers, only 39 percent of workers in the United States have access to paid leave for the birth of a child – which includes maternity leave and the use of sick or vacation time.

"The question shouldn't be why are we having it, the question should be why don't we have it," said Randy Albelda, a University of Massachusetts Boston economics professor who has studied labor and gender issues. "The United States when it comes to mothers is such a complete outlier."

Often, the question comes down to cost. Currently, only three states – California, New Jersey and Rhode Island – have implemented mandatory paid leave policies for public and private employers, in which new parents receive a percentage of their salaries for four to six weeks. The benefits are paid by an employee payroll tax, which all workers in the state pay into the state's disability insurance system.

Walsh said the city of Boston does not have a cost estimate for the benefit, but it will track that data.

"There's always concern about the cost to business, but I actually think at the end of the day it's positive, since people appreciate their companies and their employer," Walsh said.

The public employers who have implemented paid parental leave in Massachusetts say they want to set an example.

Healey said she believes her policy is "the right thing to do." "I think it's really important that the attorney general's office be a model employer," Healey said. "I believe that our workplaces should do a better job of accommodating the needs of working parents and of families, and this parental leave policy is designed to make sure that our office is doing our part."

Healey said she thinks that as more public and private employers update their policies, "They'll find that implementing supportive policies isn't as complicated or as hard as they may seem at the outset...At the end of the day, they'll end up with a happier and more productive workforce and happier employees."

Healey acknowledged that other employees will have to do the work of those on leave. But, she said, "That's the kind of work environment I want to promote."

Goldberg has talked about taking a comprehensive look at the human resources policies of the treasurer's office to ensure that there is pay equity and women are able to advance.

Goldberg this month announced the availability of 12 weeks of paid parental leave for 175 employees who work for the treasurer's office. The state retirement system passed a similar policy for its employees, and Goldberg hopes to expand paid parental leave to other offices under her control.

Goldberg said she believes the cost will be minimal, and the policies will encourage people to remain in state service long-term. "There are enormous costs associated with turnover and other types of employee policies that don't support women and families," Goldberg said.

State government executive branch workers in Massachusetts who are new parents get 10 days of paid time off and eight weeks of unpaid time off. The policy was expanded in April, under a provision enacted by former Gov. Deval Patrick, to include fathers as well as mothers.

The expansions irk some fiscal conservatives. Eileen McAnneny, president of the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, said she does not want to see the state mandate paid parental leave. She has mixed feelings about public employers providing it on their own.

"On the one hand, it is a taxpayer expense at a time when there's considerable pressures on the budget already," McAnneny said, adding that some taxpayers are being asked to fund benefits for public workers that many of them do not have themselves.

"On the other hand, the government often leads by example, and to the extent they're trying to pave the way, that may be an appropriate role as state employers," McAnneny said.

Barbara Anderson, executive director of the anti-tax group Citizens for Limited Taxation, said she would like to see an overhaul of public employee benefits to make them comparable to private sector benefits. "I wish government in general would get the concept of working for a living. You have to work and you have to put in your hours or a job doesn't get done," Anderson said.

Anderson said she has no problem with parental leave. But, she said, "Having a job is something that you have to do in order to survive. Now they're trying to make it something that provides all kinds of benefits, in the case of the public sector at the expense of the taxpayer, and in the private sector, at the expense of the business."

A 2014 study by the Washington, D.C.-based Institute for Women's Policy Research identified the benefits of paid family leave. "Research shows that paid leave increases the likelihood that workers

will return to work after childbirth, improves employee morale, has no or positive effects on workplace productivity, reduces costs to employers through improved employee retention, and improves family incomes," the report found.

There **have also been studies** showing that in countries with more generous maternity leave policies, women are less likely to advance and companies are less likely to hire women into full-time jobs.

But researchers say the policies in those countries are more generous than anything anyone in the United States is considering. Chile, for example, requires companies to provide childcare. Some European companies provide 40 weeks or more of maternity leave.

Sarah Jane Glynn, director for women's economic policy at the liberal-leaning Center for American Progress, said having a gender neutral policy, or granting paid leave for any caregiving responsibilities, is one way to avoid penalizing women by ensuring that it becomes normal for workers of both genders to take time off, whether to care for a baby or an aging parent.

"It normalizes it. It reduces the stigma and reduces the likelihood of workers being discriminated against," Glynn said. "It's just this is something everyone is likely to use at some point."

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